

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 126 837

HE 008 156

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TITLE Conflicting Pressures That Impinge Upon the Operational Effectiveness of Institutional Researchers: Challenges to the Practitioner.
PUB DATE 4 May 76
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Association for Institutional Research Forum (Los Angeles, California, May 1976)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conflict; *Decision Making; Efficiency; *Higher Education; *Institutional Research; Organizational Effectiveness; *Policy Formation; *Research Problems; *Resource Allocations

ABSTRACT

The numerous issues and problems facing college and university decisionmakers and the ever increasing information needs of external agency representatives place conflicting pressures on institutional research personnel, forcing them to make difficult decisions regarding the allocation of their resources. Outlined are several such pressures. It is pointed out how each contributes to the diffusion of institutional research resources, diminished work quality, limited creativity, and isolation from institutional constituents. To minimize these conflicting pressures, institutional researchers are challenged to exercise leadership by grappling with such issues as their roles, organization, and location within the institution. To assist in meeting these challenges, several suggestions are presented as ways to reduce pressures and increase role effectiveness to facilitate policy analysis and rational decisionmaking. (Author)

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ED126837

CONFLICTING PRESSURES THAT IMPINGE UPON THE
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CHALLENGES TO THE PRACTITIONER

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Paper presented at The Association for Institutional Research
Forum, Los Angeles, California, May 4, 1976.

HE 008156

ABSTRACTCONFLICTING PRESSURES THAT IMPINGE UPON THE
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CHALLENGES TO THE PRACTITIONER

By Joseph L. Gubasta

The numerous issues and problems facing college and university decision makers and the ever increasing information needs of external agency representatives place conflicting pressures on institutional research personnel, thus, forcing them to make difficult decisions regarding the allocation of their resources. This paper will outline several such pressures and point out how each contributes to the diffusion of institutional research resources, diminished work quality, limited creativity, and isolation from institutional constituents.

To minimize these conflicting pressures institutional researchers will be challenged to exercise leadership by grappling with such issues as their roles, organization, and location within the institution. To assist in meeting these challenges, several suggestions will be presented as ways to reduce pressures and increase role effectiveness thereby facilitating policy analysis and rationalizing decision making.

CONFLICTING PRESSURES THAT IMPINGE UPON THE
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Introduction

The purpose of this paper will be to define institutional research, highlight several conflicting pressures that confront institutional researchers, outline a few organizational and operational causes of these pressures, and prescribe several potential cures.

To assist you in understanding my point of reference with regard to these topics, I have chosen to define institutional research as follows:

Institutional research is a process of identifying subject matter and research methodology followed by collecting, analyzing, and reporting information directed at facilitating policy formulation and decision making. This definition encompasses several of the commonly accepted dimensions of institutional research, including data collection derived from Dressel (1966), Rourke and Brooks (1966), plus analysis and reporting of information cited by Saupe and Montgomery (1970), that is intended to aid in policy formulation and decision making as advanced by Russell (1965) and Suslow (1972). In addition, this definition recognizes that institutional research is an on-going process that requires human and material resources. It also suggests that researchers play an active role in identifying the subject matter that will become their focus of attention. Finally, the definition indicates that research activities should result, whenever possible, in the specification of policy alternatives

and decisions related to the accomplishment of objectives. However, this last point does not preclude the fact that some institutional research is designed to uncover problems and propose solutions.

Those of you in the institutional research profession, as well as those of you who supervise these personnel know how difficult it is to function in the manner I have prescribed. Institutional research is not an isolated process but rather a social one influenced by organizational and operational factors. This becomes evident when institutional research is examined in the context of institutional structure. Frequently, researchers are required to interact with personnel in higher, ~~middle~~, and parallel positions; that is, with executive officers, deans and division heads, department chairpersons, administrative support staff, and faculty. As you know these positions may have greater or lesser hierarchal advantages for asserting influence and/or pressure with regard to each other and the institutional researcher. Also, when institutional research is examined in the context of college and university operations, it becomes evident that researchers must integrate their roles with others in the organization. This is especially difficult to accomplish because of the nature of institutional research and the variety of different expectations about it held by members of the constituent bodies with whom researchers interact.

Conflicting Pressures that Restrict Effectiveness

Over the past nine years, I have filled different planning positions at three universities and studied several dozen more. During this time, I have observed several conflicting pressures that restrict institutional

researchers in their ability to enhance the program, budget, and facility planning and management responsibilities of decision makers.¹

Administrative needs vs. management responsibilities. One such pressure is created by institutional decision makers who must frequently exercise two different roles, namely, administrator and manager. Although the terms "administration" and "management" are frequently used interchangeably by educational writers and practitioners, they do not define synonymous roles. As Baughman (1969) pointed out, college and university administration "...is far more concerned with stewardship than management." He clarified this point by adding:

This attitude toward administration...has strong precedence in terms of our medieval counterparts. Stewards were appointed to protect, distribute equitably, and keep records of loan funds, town contributions, and student fees....[in addition to keeping]... track of students and their records, course offerings, rooms, etc.

Simply stated, the educational administrator role can be characterized by a concern for on-going operational issues and decision information that addresses current crises or resolves pressing problems of an immediate nature.

The role of college and university manager, on the other hand, is generally characterized by activities that lead to the anticipation and exploitation of opportunities, instead of reactive problem solving. Drucker (1964, p.5) emphasized this point when he wrote: "All one can hope to get by solving a problem is to restore normality." Given the

¹The term decision makers refers to executive officers, deans, support unit heads, and department chairpersons.

present state of higher education, normality is not very desirable. Therefore, effective management requires the initiation of change through the establishment of structures and procedures designed to identify and achieve future goals and objectives. This can best be accomplished when the planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling functions of management are complemented by research studies resulting in useable management information.

By virtue of their technical competence, institutional researchers are capable of providing a variety of services to complement both the administrator and manager roles of decision makers. However, since the number of institutional personnel who exercise both these roles is frequently large, and their needs varied, the demands for research assistance can be numerous. In addition, since institutional constituents who exercise administrative and management functions hold varying degrees of status within the institution, they are able to employ influence and assert varying degrees of authority in their relationships with researchers. These circumstances often create conflicting pressures that require researchers to establish priorities among assignments and activities that relate to operational problems, planning and policy analysis.

Internal vs. external data reporting. The previously mentioned dilemma is compounded by a second pressure resulting from the information and data needs required by members of other internal institutional constituent groups; such as, students, faculty, and governing board members. In addition, representatives of external groups such as coordinating councils, state and local government agencies, accrediting agencies, etc., also place enormous demands on researchers. Their needs result in requests for large amounts of institutional data to support budget, program, and capital

facility requests, research proposals, and evaluation studies. As you know, these groups also request data that they hope will address numerous questions and issues relating to a number of special concerns or problems such as affirmative action, tenure, faculty activity, and salaries, to name a few.

The pressures exerted on institutional researchers by members of these internal and external groups are directly proportionate to their institutional and/or political authority and compound the organizational and operational problems experienced by researchers. For example, many external groups exercise considerable political influence over the operations of educational institutions through such activities as fiscal appropriations, institutional mission and program approval, and program evaluation. On the other hand, internal groups have a host of needs pertaining to the maintenance and/or furtherance of their special interests. Frequently, these needs relate directly to increasing their resources, expanding their programs, and self governance. From the institutional researcher's viewpoint, the information needs of these two groups are frequently at cross purposes, thereby compounding the researcher's dilemma with regard to subject matter selection, use of research outcomes and their relationships to administrative and management functions.

Research vs. data analysis. A third pressure confronting institutional researchers concerns role conflicts as researcher vs. data analyzer. Although these roles are not mutually exclusive, that is, the tasks inherent in one can readily be identified in the other, several distinctions do exist. The research function typically is characterized by such activities as: 1) selecting subject matter, 2) identifying appropriate methodology, 3) undertaking or coordinating the study, and 4) reporting the finding(s)

in a decision making/policy setting format. On the other hand, the data analysis function typically involves the review of enrollments, staff counts, financial conditions, facilities utilization and inventory. Analysis of such data may include processing into tables, charts, graphs, statistical treatment, integration and interpretation. This role typically finds the data analyzer reacting to the subject matter requests of others who need data relating to pressing problems or issues.

From an operational viewpoint, these conflicting expectations require that researchers clarify their role as initiator of vs. reactor to information requests. The former role permits the researcher flexibility in subject matter selection, methodology, study coordination, reporting processes and format designed to complement policy formulation and decision making. The latter role generally limits opportunities to perform these professional activities in lieu of performing clerk-like activities.

Organizational and Operational Problems

These conflicting pressures are perpetuated by several organizational and operational problems that I wish to highlight. The organizational placement of institutional research is an issue about which much has been written and said. Although there are many different view points on this issue, I recommend that institutional research staff report to the executive officer most responsible for institutional planning. By providing staff support to this line officer, whatever his or her title, researchers should be able to avoid channeling the majority of their attention to issues that are administratively motivated and short-term problem oriented. This organizational placement can overcome several operational problems. For

example, researchers can be relieved of some pressures to provide administrators with alternative solutions to current problems by being encouraged to anticipate problems before they occur and recommend ways they can be avoided. Instead of analyzing data to confirm what has happened, researchers will be encouraged to employ data to project alternative impacts of decisions before they are made. Instead of trying to design and/or implement planning and management decision information systems in their spare time, researchers will be encouraged to keep pace with systems development as a routine task. Instead of trying to devise ways to implement analytical tools and techniques with little or no thought given to their planning and management decision making utility, researchers will be encouraged to grapple with such questions as: "What will these tools and techniques do to improve planning and management?" and "Will such tools and techniques meet institutional decision maker needs?"

Although I have recommended that institutional researchers report to the line officer with planning responsibilities, I am not suggesting they limit their services to this one person. Due to the diverse program and organizational complexities of colleges and universities, institutional planning officers must rely heavily on unit heads to initiate planning activities. Such activities can be encouraged by providing institutional research staff support to department chairpersons, deans and division heads. Since many academic unit personnel lack the knowledge and skill to prepare plans that integrate program, financial and facility resource needs, I have found them accepting of all the help available. Institutional researchers can assist unit planners by providing them with planning and management information, identifying policy variables and suggesting alter-

native changes within the jurisdiction of unit decision authority and control, and, if possible, utilizing simulation capabilities for the benefit of these decision makers.

Another operational problem that institutional researchers can help to alleviate, if they perform the roles I am suggesting, concerns their service to external agencies who desire planning, management, and accountability information. As you know from experience, coordinating commissions and government agencies are motivating many institutions to undertake workload, cost and other studies. As you also know, very few institutions have personnel who, through "hands-on" experience, are aware of the conceptual, operational, and utility advantages and disadvantages of such studies. I feel institutional researchers should acquire this experience and then be encouraged to provide technical assistance to external groups who plan to initiate or revise such studies.

Challenges

The conflicting pressures and problems just outlined cause me to challenge institutional researchers to continually grapple with key issues pertaining to their roles, in the context of institutional planning and management. The following suggestions are intended to reduce the aforementioned pressures while increasing effectiveness in aiding decision makers.

First and foremost, institutional researchers should strive to exercise leadership. Leadership, as defined by Hemphill (1958) and supported by other organizational theorists, requires the initiation of structures and procedures to accomplish institution and unit goals and objectives. This

definition of leadership when placed in the context of institutional research, as I defined it, should challenge researchers to select subject matter that is based on criteria directly relating to the management functions of decision makers, i.e., planning, organizing, motivating, and controlling changes in the use of human and material resources to achieve institutional goals and objectives. Note, I emphasized management functions, not managers, as the major determinant of subject matter selection. This distinction is made because my experience with college and university executive and middle managers indicates that many lack adequate training and/or experience commensurate with the demands placed upon them. This dilemma requires that researchers exercise leadership by helping decision makers to recognize and deal with management issues and needs by proposing specific studies that relate to these concerns. According to Drucker (1964, p.6), the challenge is "...not how to do things right but [more importantly], how to find the right things to do, and to concentrate resources and efforts on them."

Many institutional researchers can exercise leadership by effectively utilizing the organizational and operational mechanisms already available to them. For example, researchers generally have the flexibility to serve as staff support to a variety of institutional decision makers even though they may report to a line officer, typically the academic executive officer. The organizational placement of institutional research can provide numerous opportunities for interaction with decision makers at all levels within the institution if researchers seek out such interactions. In addition, their structural placement under an executive officer can provide an excuse to refuse studies that are perceived too wasteful of limited institutional research resources.

If organizational location is perceived as a structural or operational handicap to institutional researchers, then I challenge them to employ a new structure that will increase their roles. In this regard the University of Utah model is offered as an efficient and workable alternative that should be considered for the following reasons:

1. The institutional research function is housed in the Academic and Financial Planning Office (AFP) which also provides staff support to planning and budgeting functions.
2. AFPO staff report to a director who in turn reports to a staff vice president. This relationship eliminates the possibility of institutional research activities being dominated solely by one executive officer with academic, budgeting, or administrative affairs responsibilities.
3. Institutional research personnel have excellent access to the financial, personnel, student, course, and facilities data bases, some of which are under direct control of AFP staff.
4. The registrar's office funds one AFP position as support to institutional research. The incumbent conducts most student and course related studies, completes HEGIS and other reports, and prepares statistical summaries. This frees institutional research staff to undertake planning and management studies.
5. With direct access to budget personnel, the institutional research staff spend much of their time implementing planning and management systems (NCHEMS products, etc.).
6. Institutional research has administrative responsibility for programmer/analyst personnel.

The nature of research itself is another factor that enhances leadership. Institutional research should be characterized by the constant search for subject matter and inquiry about institutional policies and issues. When research activities result in preparation of a set of alternatives which decision makers can review before initiating structures, procedures, and actions, they are indicative of leadership acts. Researchers, to be effective, cannot be locked into routine operational tasks which recur

periodically over time and consume major portions of their resources. If this latter point is the case, then role incumbents are not doing research.

I am not suggesting that institutional research personnel work in a vacuum when identifying management related subject matter. Rather, I pose the challenge that they leave the confines of their offices to identify the change-oriented needs of decision makers. This strategy requires that researchers meet frequently with key decision makers, ask probing but not threatening questions, and employ listening skills which draw out the operational, analytical, and management concerns of these key persons.

By meeting with decision makers to discuss management concerns, researchers are setting the stage for another challenge I wish to pose, namely, to be "hired as a consultant." This is possible only after decision makers have outlined their needs. Then researchers are able to select from among several needs the subject matter they perceive to be most worthy of study. They can then propose appropriate research methodology and discuss data display questions with decision makers. Implementing this strategy will permit researchers to play the active role in determining subject matter selection I referred to earlier, as well as, minimizing the possibility of being exploited as mere data analyzers.

Institutional researchers are also challenged to enhance their consultant image by sharing the product of their efforts with appropriate institutional constituents. Many researchers do studies on, or require the participation of institutional personnel. However, some researchers often

times neglect to share the results of their labors with members of these groups. Typical examples of this might include faculty activity analyses, cost studies, analyses of grading practices, etc. I recognize many reasons can be thought of for not sharing information and study results. However, what better way do researchers have to display their talents and skills? Moreover, to be hired as a consultant by institutional decision makers, a goal every institutional research professional should strive to achieve, requires that he or she develop a reputation as an expert with saleable skills.

Another suggestion requires institutional research personnel to identify and provide staff support to key committees charged with formulating policy and evaluating performance. However, regardless of whether institutional researchers consult with individuals or groups, they must question the need for studies when the relationship to one or more management functions is not clear.

The last point I wish to raise relates to the contributions you as institutional research staff have made to your institution and its constituents during the past year. How much of what you have done during this period related to administrative vs. management issues? Whose decisions have you attempted to facilitate? How much time and effort was devoted to internal vs. external reporting of data or information? How much research vs. data analysis did you undertake? Finally, what can you do this year to improve your performance as leaders within your institution even if that leadership remains anonymous?

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